

id: 224948
date: 9/14/2009 10:36
refid: 09HAVANA559
origin: US Interests Section Havana
classification: SECRET
destination: 09HAVANA500
header:
VZCZCXYZ0009
PP RUEHWEB

DE RUEHUB #0559/01 2571036
ZNY SSSSS ZZH
P 141036Z SEP 09
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TO RUEHC/SECSTATE WASHDC PRIORITY 4755
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INFO RHMFISS/CDR USSOUTHCOM MIAMI FL PRIORITY
RUEAIIA/CIA WASHINGTON DC PRIORITY
RHMFISS/COGARD INTELCOORDCEN WASHINGTON DC PRIORITY
RUCOWCV/COMCOGARD SECTOR KEY WEST FL PRIORITY
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RUEAHLA/HOMELAND SECURITY CENTER WASHINGTON DC PRIORITY
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RUEHKG/USDAO KINGSTON JM PRIORITY

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S E C R E T HAVANA 000559

SIPDIS

E.O. 12958: DECL: 09/11/2029
TAGS: SNAR, PREL, SMIG, PGOV, CU, ASEC
SUBJECT: CHECK PLEASE! GOVERNMENT OF CUBA MAY ACCEPT U.S.
OFFER OF POST-HURRICANE ASSISTANCE

REF: HAVANA 500 & 511

Classified By: CDA JAMES WILLIAMS FOR REASONS 1.4 (B) & (D)

1. (S/NF) Summary: On 3 September 2009, the U.S. Coast Guard Drug Interdiction Specialist (DIS) assigned to the U.S. Interests Section (USINT) in Havana, Cuba, engaged in a candid conversation with a Cuban Ministry of Foreign Affairs (MINREX) official who provided insight into the possible Government of Cuba (GOC) response to any USG offers of

post-hurricane assistance to the GOC. End Summary.

2. (S/NF) A MINREX officer ("officer") in the Ministry's North American Division, Rodney, who attends repatriations somewhat infrequently (DIS has had contact with this official on approximately 5 occasions- USINT consular officers have also met this officer on other occasions while attending repatriations), exchanged pleasantries with the DIS at the outset of the repatriation. During the boat ride to the receiving pier, the officer almost immediately directed the conversation towards what seemed to be a pre-planned discussion. Offering up the usual &in my personal opinion while placing a firm hand on his chest and gesturing towards himself, the officer stated: "I have been reading a lot of U.S. press reports about possible U.S. hurricane assistance and I think the GOC would be willing to accept that assistance." DIS stated to the officer that that approach would be different than last year's GOC response to the multiple USG offers of post-hurricane assistance. The officer went on to say that "(political) conditions this year are very different than they were last year this time," an apparent reference to the recent re-establishment of USINT access to MINREX (reftels).

3. (S/NF) DIS stated to the officer that it was common and prudent practice to offer a disaster assistance response team (DART) to locations following natural disasters to assess the damage and the necessary level and type of assistance. The officer responded by saying that: "the level of damage to Cuba during last year's hurricane season was evident and the team was a precondition to providing post-hurricane assistance to Cuba; the U.S. should not impose preconditions and should allow the GOC to determine how assistance is used." In turn, the DIS responded that the USG is not in the business of writing blank checks to foreign governments to which the officer seemed to be at a loss for words. The officer and the DIS cordially agreed that this was an ideological difference between both nations, and agreed that while neither of us wanted to see any hurricane affect Cuba, should the opportunity arise for the USG to offer hurricane assistance to the GOC, it would be interesting to see how the scenario unfolds.

4. (S/NF) This officer is a young (29 years old), cordial, well-spoken MINREX officer who utilizes repatriations as an opportunity to practice what might already be considered polished English. He studied economics, is well versed in international political ideology, and appears to be a voracious reader. Like his more senior MINREX counterparts, he makes a point during each repatriation to discuss recent U.S. press reporting relative to U.S.-Cuba relations, and uses each repatriation as an opportunity to elicit a response from the DIS on a wide scope of U.S.-Cuban matters, always under the guise of being a personal opinion or interest. He does not balk when given the chance to prop-up and support the tenets of the Cuban revolution, and especially, in his government's opinion, the harsh treatment the USG has

afforded the Cuban people throughout the course of the revolution. He is able to support and speak to the major GOC talking points (i.e. the embargo, Cuban-Americans, etc.), and is likely to rise in the GOC.

5. (S/NF) Comment: Yet again, MINREX has utilized the DIS and the repatriation process as a forum to air out a current GOC

focus, and float the idea by a U.S. officer who the GOC is aware works in the political-economic section at USINT. The typical "this is my opinion" approach from this MINREX officer is an opening gesture, whereafter he and each MINREX officer then communicates a willingness, need, or current focus of the GOC that they have decided to communicate to the Mission and USG at large. This may well be a concerted effort on the part of MINREX to engage in one-on-one communication, at a relatively low-level, as a circuitous approach to GOC-U.S. communications in lieu of direct or over-publicized talks. By communicating in this manner, the GOC can communicate with the USG, in this case over the issue of hurricane assistance, and still maintain its public image and propaganda campaign that lambaste the USG for its approach towards Cuba. Interestingly, DIS cannot recall any recent press reporting having to do with possible post-hurricane assistance to Cuba.

(S/NF) Further Comment: DIS was extremely surprised by the hurricane assistance-related comments made by the MINREX officer. Having spent a significant amount of time working and traveling with Cuban MININT and MINREX officers over the past year, Cubans are extremely proud people, and almost never admit that there is a flaw in their system, even when the flaw is a glaring one. For a MINREX officer to admit that his country may be willing to accept assistance from the U.S. should a hurricane ravage this island again, ventures well beyond the perceived pride level of GOC officials. More than anything, the GOC does not like to be embarrassed, and taking handouts from the USG may well be a point of embarrassment for the GOC should they choose to accept. As such, any genuine post-hurricane assistance offer should be extended quietly; however, the USG should be wary that the GOC may be expecting a blank check, not a calculated offer of pragmatic post-hurricane assistance. End Comment.

WILLIAMS

=====CABLE ENDS=====